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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA: ELECTIONS PARAMOUNT, WITHOUT
AMENDMENTS OR FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

REF: 1384

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) PM Siniora seemed surprisingly optimistic about the prospects for selecting a credible compromise presidential candidate in a September 12 meeting with visiting EEB PDAS Elizabeth Dibble. He reiterated his opposition to amending the constitution and stressed the election must be held without foreign interference. Although his government has been under a constant barrage of political crises, the Lebanese economy has weathered the storm unexpectedly well. Securing Lebanon's freedom and democratic institutions will allow it to unleash its great economic potential. End summary.

MUCH WORK AHEAD AT NAHR AL-BARID

¶2. (C) An upbeat Siniora, accompanied by senior advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Nouredine met September 12 with the Ambassador, visiting EEB PDAS Elizabeth Dibble and NEA/ELA Deputy Director Stephen Newhouse, Pol/Econ Chief and EconOff at the PM's office at the Grand Serail. Thwarting all of our repeated and fevered attempts to keep the conversation focused on the economic/commercial agenda PDAS Dibble had come to Lebanon exclusively to address, the PM turned first to Nahr al-Barid. Siniora credited GOL resolve and determination in bringing the crisis to an end -- the first time in 40 years that the Lebanese state acted autonomously, he said. It was also the first time the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) entered a Palestinian camp. A poorly trained and badly equipped army entered what was basically a "street war" of the "Blackhawk Down" variety, and emerged united and victorious, he stated proudly.

¶3. (C) The September 10 donors' conference (reftel) for reconstruction in and around the camp was a huge success, he continued, both in terms of attendance and pledges. Siniora thanked the US for its contribution, adding that it sent a good message, but much more needs to be done. Reconstruction of the camp was a necessary operation; without it Lebanon would face a catastrophe, especially with respect to the 11 other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Siniora added that for the past two years his government has made a determined effort to improve its relationship with the

Palestinians and the conditions inside the camps to avoid creating the desperation that led to the creation of groups like Fatah al-Islam (FAI).

CONTINUAL CRISIS, BUT GREAT ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

14. (C) For the past three years (i.e., since the extension of President Lahoud's mandate) the GOL has been operating as if it were under a gun, Siniora continued, citing the string of political assassinations, explosions, government crises, the 2006 war, and, most recently, Nahr al-Barid. As a result, his government has been operating in a continual crisis mode, but it has nevertheless been able to overcome obstacles such as the opposition's refusal to accept the Special Tribunal, its demands for a national unity government, and now the conflict with extremists at Nahr al-Barid. He thanked the US for its strong support, both politically and in terms of financial and other assistance.

15. (C) Despite all these challenges, Lebanon's economy continues to demonstrate its resiliency, Siniora stressed, turning at last (however briefly) to the purpose of PDAS Dibble's visit. He agreed with PDAS Dibble on the country's enormous economic potential. However, he added, the exodus of highly qualified people was troubling. Freedom and democracy are important political as well as economic values, he said, a point he made earlier in the week in his address to Lebanese businesses participating in the fifth Lebanese Business Opportunities forum. Both agreed that Lebanon offers unique opportunities because of its geographic location, size, well-known hospitality, and multi-lingual (Arab, French, English) environment.

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FOCUS ON PRESIDENCY

16. (C) Shifting to politics, Siniora called the presidency the "only pertinent issue; the most important thing is to have elections." Otherwise, he warned, it would be a major blow to democracy and freedom in Lebanon and could "trigger" major changes in the country. He reiterated his strong opposition to any further tinkering with Lebanon's constitution, emphasizing instead the need to change the culture of how the constitution is viewed. If the constitution is amended now to permit LAF Commander Sleiman or Central Bank Governor Salameh to become president, then it becomes that much easier again six years from now to amend the constitution for an extension or for another army commander to become head of state. It is time to end two decades of "bad behavior" and set the right precedent for future presidential elections, he said, stressing that the most important thing is that the election be held free from foreign interference.

17. (C) Regarding the opposition's offer to forgo demands for a national unity government in return for the majority's acceptance of a mandatory two-thirds quorum, Siniora said Parliament Speaker Berri had merely "repackaged an expired product." The best response in his view was to take the idea and build on it. Since both sides agreed on the need to find a compromise, they should drop all preconditions and sit down and talk. The Ambassador agreed, stressing that the US, like France, also welcome the majority and opposition reaching a compromise on the president, but not as a result of intimidation or threats.

18. (C) Siniora, who had just met with Sudanese presidential envoy Mohamad Othman Ismail, said the envoy told him he had received indications that the opposition was interested in coming to terms on the issue of the presidency. Siniora also stressed the important role of the Christians in Lebanon's complicated political mosaic, noting that they should be the keenest to hold elections within the constitutional

timeframe. "Constructive competition" among Lebanon's various confessional groups is a useful aspect of Lebanese politics, especially if it brought out the best each group had to offer.

COMMENT

19. (C) Siniora, joking with his staff and visitors, was clearly in a good mood. Perhaps it was the LAF's long-awaited success in Nahr al-Barid, or the successful donors' conference, or perhaps the long line of diplomatic envoys making their way to the Grand Serail was the sugar that made the bear dance. Whatever the cause, his upbeat assessment of the prospects for resolving the presidency via dialogue and compromise strikes us as more optimistic than what we are hearing from other majority -- and also opposition -- leaders, many of whom, if anything, have dug in their heels, refusing to budge from their positions.

FELTMAN